

Briefing paper No. 5

# Children Begging for Qur'ānic School Masters

*Evidence from  
West and Central  
Africa*

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## Acronyms and abbreviations

ANPPCAN	African Network for the Prevention and Protection Against Child Abuse and Neglect
CFA	Communauté Financière Africaine (African Financial Community)
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ENDA	Environnement et Développement du Tiers Monde
ICI	International Cocoa Initiative
ILO	International Labour Organization
ILO-IPEC	ILO International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour
LUTRENA	Lutte contre le Trafic des Enfants en Afrique de l'Ouest et du Centre
MAEJT	Mouvement Africain des Enfants et Jeunes Travailleurs
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
UCW	Understanding Children's Work
WACAP	West Africa Cocoa Agriculture Project

## Definitions and labels

**Children attending Qur'ānic school** go by different labels: **Talibés** (Wolof); Garibous (Dioula); **Al-majiri** (Hausa); **Almudos** (Fulbe).

**Muslim teachers** are labelled differently: **Marabout** (derivative of the Arabic word *Murābiṭ*) is commonly used in Francophone countries; **Mallam** (Hausa version of the Arabic word Mu'allim) in Anglophone countries; and occasionally **Alfa** (Yoruba term for a Muslim cleric).

**Qur'ānic schools** are named differently according to their type and language: Traditional schools are usually called **Daara** (Wolof derivative of the Arabic word dar, house) or **Makarantar** (Hausa for a place of learning and reciting), whereas schools associated with Islamic modernism and incorporating other topics than the Qur'ān are called **Madrasa**, plural Madāris (Arabic for school), Arabic schools or Islamiyya schools.

In this paper, the term

**Talibé** is used as a generic label for boys (and some girls) learning the Qur'ān in a traditional school, whether they are involved in begging or not. Specific note is made when the information pertain to Talibés who beg.

**Marabout** is used for the Islamic teacher leading the school and teaching children the Qur'ān with or without assistant teachers, and

**Daara** for the school.

## Preface

A third of all children in West and Central Africa are estimated to work full- or part-time, paid or unpaid. Many of children are involved in hazardous and harmful economic activities, such as working in mines. Some are also exploited for sex and trafficked. Even if the work itself is not hazardous, many working children do not have access to education or drop out of school due to the opportunity costs for parents of keeping children in school and out of work. However, some children do combine work and school and earning an income may enable children to continue their schooling. Where the quality of education is poor or children are exposed to violence in schools, some children may prefer work to school. In some contexts, children derive a sense of meaning and responsibility from their work and the contributions they make to the family. To take them away from work without replacing the meaning and status they may receive can result in worse outcomes.

The prevention and response to child labour and exploitation in the region has fallen short in terms of quality, impact and scale. Over the past decade, much has been learned about what works and what doesn't in relation to child labour, exploitation and trafficking. Internationally, Understanding Children's Work (UCW) has done much to strengthen the evidence base. Many other organizations and researchers from different academic perspectives have contributed to a more differentiated analysis of children's work and of prevention and response efforts (e.g. Bourdillon, Myers, White, Boyden, Liebel, Woodhead).

Reviews and evaluations of anti-trafficking efforts have highlighted the need to distinguish between child migration and child trafficking and to avoid labelling all forms of child movement as child trafficking. These evaluations also emphasise the need for a better understanding of child mobility and the cultural, social and economic foundations of children's work in a broader context of social and economic mobility. A regional child mobility initiative was launched in 2008 to improve understanding of the cultural foundations of 'child labour', 'child migration' and 'child trafficking' and the role children's work and mobility plays in children's socialisation. The work done by the child mobility initiative is an important effort to rethink and redevelop prevention and responses to child labour that take social and cultural concepts of child development and education, social mobility and social protection into account. From this perspective, children and migration are linked to transitions within the life course and to rites of passage, whereby migration is part of becoming an adult, to earn cash and to get married. This perspective complements, and to some extent challenges, other approaches to child labour that focus more narrowly on poverty reduction, human resource development, or the application of international labour standards.

Five thematic briefing papers have been developed for types of child labour that have particular relevance for children in West and Central Africa. The focus is on the most pressing forms of child labour in the region, types of work that are receiving the greatest level of attention and have seen most resistance to change: Children in artisanal quarries and mines; Talibé children (Qur'ānic school pupils who are begging) in Sahelian countries; Children in commercial agriculture; Children in the informal urban sector; and Child domestic workers.

The purpose of the child labour briefing papers is to synthesise the empirical evidence of effective approaches to child labour and exploitation and identify approaches that have not worked or are unlikely to work with the current levels of human and financial resources. The briefing papers are aimed towards professionals working on child protection, education and social policy in countries in West and Central Africa. Each briefing paper presents evidence on the following aspects: description of the phenomenon, situation, trends, scale, impact on children; effective approaches to preventing child labour and exploitation.

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## Introduction

This briefing paper focuses on children in Sahelian countries, who are enrolled in Qur'ānic schools and beg as part of their education. In the region, Islamic education predates colonization and the establishment of mission and secular state schools. Ideologies about religion, politics and education have shaped how Qur'ānic schools have transformed and proliferated over time and have resulted in a wide variety of schools today.

Some schools – the *Daaras* or *Makarantar* – are founded on Islamic traditionalism and a Master-disciple pedagogy, while others – the *Madāris* (Arabic schools) – are founded on Islamic modernism and combine the study of the Qur'ān with subjects from the curriculum of state schools and a teaching style resembling that of state schools.<sup>[13, 16, 19, 48, 49, 50]</sup> Pupils in *Madāris* pay school fees and are not sent out to beg,<sup>[29]</sup> whereas education in *Daaras* often is free or almost free but implies that pupils – *Talibés* – may beg for alms.<sup>[3, 16, 17, 22, 31]</sup> However, some *Marabouts* have found alternative ways of maintaining their *Daaras* and do not send their *Talibés* out to beg.<sup>[19, 40]</sup> **The specific focus in this paper on *Talibés* who beg provides a partial picture of religious education in Qur'ānic schools.**

International agencies, NGOs and media often equate the highly visible phenomenon of child beggars in large cities, such as Dakar, Bamako, Ouagadougou, Niamey, Nouakchott, Kano and Maiduguri with *Talibés*, and with forced begging. Many *Talibés* are also perceived to have been trafficked, because they have moved from rural villages to Qur'ānic schools in urban areas within their country or in neighbouring countries.<sup>[3, 15, 44, 51]</sup>

Based on the review of a broad range of literature – spanning from newspaper articles, to reports of commissioned research, to Master and Doctoral theses, to peer reviewed academic publications – this briefing paper aims to unpack why children become *Talibés* and the conditions in which they live, including the time spent begging. The paper also raises a number of issues that need further investigation.

## Situating *Talibés* in the 2000s

A typical *Talibé* is a young boy of school-going age, but girls also attend Qur'ānic schools. Girls almost always study in *Daaras* close to their home so they can continue living with their family and they are not sent out to beg.<sup>[3]</sup> Boys also study close to home but may also relocate to Qur'ānic schools away from their family, in which case they are more likely to beg. Begging is usually done by younger students while older ones, who have advanced beyond memorization of the Qur'ān to study mysticism and other core subjects, do not beg but help supervise younger students.<sup>[5, 15, 34]</sup>

*Talibés* come from all ethnic groups, especially in countries like Mauritania, Niger, the Gambia, Senegal and Mali and Guinea, where over 85 per cent of the population are Muslims.<sup>[19]</sup> Some parents use cultural explanations along the lines of ethnic origin to justify why their children are *not* sent to *Daaras* where begging is part of the curriculum, e.g. the Felupe, Balantas and Papel of Guinea Bissau.<sup>[17]</sup> While children from certain ethnic groups may be overrepresented among the *Talibés* who beg, using ethnic origin as an explanation for child begging misses important inequalities. Children from some regions are more likely to become *Talibés* than those from other regions for reasons ranging from lack of access to state schools in

**Benin.** In 2001, 89 per cent of the *Talibés* were boys and 11 per cent girls. The *Talibés*' average age was 12 years. Age at which children begin Qur'ānic school:

- 3-4 years 12 per cent
  - 5-8 years 43 per cent
  - 9-12 years 30 per cent
  - 13+ years 15 per cent
- (Sample N=485)<sup>[3, p. 10]</sup>

**Senegal.** In 2009, 25 per cent of the children who left home, studied the Qur'ān. Among the boys, 43 per cent left for this reason compared to 4 per cent of the girls. The mean age for beginning Qur'ānic school was 7.2 years; two in three *Talibé* had begun before the age of 8 years but only 14 per cent had begun before they turned five. There was a noticeable decline in *Talibés* older than 12 years. (Sample N=2,400 households)<sup>[26, p. 32, 49]</sup>

**Mauritania.** In 2006, 40 per cent of the *Talibés* interviewed were aged 6-8 years; 48 per cent 9-10 years and 12 per cent 11 years or above. (Sample N=300 *Talibés*).<sup>[5, p. 12-13]</sup>

remote areas, to relative poverty, to child circulation within kin groups and to the importance given to religion.<sup>[15, 30, 49]</sup>

Whether or not children beg as part of their Qur'ānic education depends on the wealth, reputation and moral stance of the *Marabout*. The fact that more Fulbe than Wolof children (*Talibé* and non-*Talibé*) beg in Dakar and two-thirds of the Fulbe child beggars are *Talibés*,<sup>[44]</sup> may suggest a variety of things: that they attend poorer *Daaras*; that they primarily migrate to urban areas to pursue Islamic education; that demand for well-established *Daara* places is higher than the availability; and for non-*Talibés* that they either have few urban-based relatives or that these relatives are unable to mediate employment for migrant children. It is therefore important to examine in greater detail why some ethnic groups are overrepresented and to consider issues, such as gender, age, inequality and processes of marginalization.

Census data and the UNESCO education database do not offer much statistical information on the different types of Qur'ānic schools. However, small-scale studies offer some indication of the situation. In Niger, for example, more than 40,000 Qur'ānic schools existed in the early 2000s and in Chad 45 per cent of children in education attended Qur'ānic schools.<sup>[19]</sup> Similarly in Senegal, around the same number of children were educated in Qur'ānic schools as in state schools in 1991.<sup>[39]</sup> In two of the Sufi city-states – Touba of the Murides (Wolof) and Medina Gounass of the Tijaniyya (Fulbe) – the Caliphs closed state schools in the 1990s due to the fact that the number of children attending *Madāris* was decreasing and to prevent a further drain of students away from Islamic education.<sup>[30]</sup>

The rejection of state schools cannot be explained by Islamic traditionalism. The first *Madrassa* in Touba in Senegal opened in 1969.<sup>[37]</sup> In northern Nigeria the Fityan al-Islam organization is behind a great proliferation of *Islamiyya* schools (*Madāris*). They opened the first school in 1972; by 1983 they ran 183 schools and taught 11,835 students in Kano state alone, and by 2000 they had 2,881 schools with 302,514 students across northern Nigeria.<sup>[48, 49]</sup> In Mali and Burkina Faso, *Daaras* are important educational institutions, whereas in northern Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire and Cameroon they have gradually been replaced by *Madāris*.<sup>[19, 35]</sup>

Without reliable statistical data, it is difficult to assess the importance of Qur'ānic schools vis-à-vis state schools and the degree to which children enrolled in public schools also pursue religious education outside school hours, as studies in Cameroon<sup>[20]</sup> and Ghana<sup>[13]</sup> show. Furthermore, it is impossible to assess the number of pupils enrolled in different types of Qur'ānic schools, let alone in *Daaras*, which are among the most marginalized institutions in the educational system.<sup>[30]</sup>

### Reasons Why Children Become Talibés

Some reports argue that poor parents send children away, including to study in *Daaras*, to reduce the number of mouths to feed within the household.<sup>[15, 44, 46]</sup> This is a utilitarian but too simplified view of long-standing child circulation and fostering practices. This view reduces family decisions to pure economics without considering the importance for children and parents of strengthening social alliances, the prospects for education,<sup>[24, 34, 38]</sup> and, in certain communities, of dissociating themselves from the stigma of slave origin.<sup>[28]</sup> The poverty narrative assumes that children are consumers and not producers.<sup>[34]</sup> Although parents often mention poverty as a reason for sending children to Qur'ānic schools, **poverty cannot be used as an**

**Guinea Bissau.** Parents feel it is their obligation to educate their children and by sending children to study the Qur'ān, they hope to be rewarded by God.<sup>[17, p. 32]</sup>

**Senegal.** Wolof farmers emphasised that they loved their children, needed their labour and could provide for them. They sent children to Qur'ānic schools due to spiritual, educational and moral considerations. They waived their own needs for their sons' labour to demonstrate their membership in Islam, hoping that the discipline in the *Daara* would mould their sons' character and bring them closer to Allah.<sup>[34, p. 59]</sup>

**Senegal.** 71 per cent of the household heads would like to place a child in an apprenticeship, whereas 55 per cent would unreservedly place a child with a *Marabout* in the community and 23 per cent with a migrant *Marabout*.<sup>[26, p. 43-44]</sup>

**Benin.** In 2001, 73 per cent of the *Talibés* were placed with a *Marabout* by their parents; 10 per cent were placed by another family member; 3 per cent came by other paths; and 1 per cent did not know how they came to the *Daara*.<sup>[3, p. 12]</sup>

**explanatory factor in isolation.** The decision to send one or more children to a *Daara* is intertwined with religious and moral norms, pedagogical beliefs, and parents' own experience and broader processes of marginalisation and exclusion.<sup>[3]</sup> Moreover, not all *Talibés* come from the poorest quintile.<sup>[17, 26]</sup>

In the Sahel, with its long history of Islam, many parents give priority to studying the Qur'ān and the *Daara* system is deeply embedded in how many people think about education.<sup>[5, 15, 16, 28, 44]</sup> **Parents' motivations for sending a child to a distant Qur'ānic school are part of their own religious beliefs.** By ensuring the reproduction of religious practices and sacrificing the benefits of keeping children at home, parents hope to be rewarded by Allah.<sup>[17, 34]</sup> **Their religious position vis-à-vis their local community of Muslims** may also influence educational choices, as the family's social standing may increase if their children study the Qur'ān successfully or they have good relations with a powerful *Marabout*.<sup>[17, 34]</sup> Finally, **parents are motivated by their aspirations for their children**, as they believe *Talibés* acquire life skills and come closer to Allah by studying the Qur'ān.<sup>[3]</sup> Those who advance in their Islamic studies will earn respect and accumulate symbolic and material wealth by: leading prayers, writing charms and making protective amulets, and by becoming part of vibrant and influential networks of Islamic scholars.<sup>[34, 38]</sup>

Parents rarely send all their children to Qur'ānic schools. In poor communities, it is common **to diversify children's educational paths** by enrolling at least one child in formal education, sending one or more children to a Qur'ānic school, arrange apprenticeships, keeping some children at home to work on the farm, while permitting others to migrate for work or to help relatives.<sup>[26, 28, 31, 42]</sup> **Many parents carefully consider whether a child can endure the hardship of living in a *Daara*** and whether the chosen *Marabout* has a good reputation and provides his students with opportunities for a better future.<sup>[14, 17, 28]</sup>

Poverty plays a role at a more structural level. The generally poor socio-economic situation of most countries in the region, and in particular of rural regions, means that few public services are available for the rural population.<sup>[17]</sup> **The choice is not necessarily between enrolling a child in the local primary school or sending him to a *Daara* elsewhere.** It may be between sending a child to a relative to get access to formal schooling and sending a child to a *Marabout*; or sending a child away to pursue formal education instead of being in the local Qur'ānic school.<sup>[15, 17, 57]</sup> Decisions are rooted in the availability and quality of education options.

The appeal of public schools may have decreased due to spending cuts, deregulation and privatisation following neo-liberal economic policies<sup>[30, 49]</sup> and to young people's difficulties finding paid employment after completing basic education.<sup>[16]</sup> However, parents are sometimes critical of the local Qur'ānic schools too and justify sending children to distant *Daaras* in order to ensure education of higher quality.<sup>[17]</sup> **Generally, parents appreciate a broader education for their children, combining the study of the Qur'ān with literacy, numeracy and other skills** that enhance the children's job prospects.<sup>[3, 15, 17]</sup>

There are few indications in the reviewed literature of children's own reasons for pursuing education in Islamic institutions. Some children obey the wishes of their parents despite having other preferences, others may be motivated by the prospect of future travels.<sup>[3, 17]</sup> Given the importance of migration for rural, and perhaps also urban, children<sup>[21]</sup> and the number of West African students enrolled in Islamic colleges and universities in Morocco,<sup>[10]</sup> **programming needs to examine children's own motivations for enrolling in Qur'ānic education.**

**Mali.** In the 1980s, public school attendance declined, while enrolment in Qur'ānic and community schools increased<sup>[16, p. 18]</sup>

**Benin.** My father decided I should go to Qur'ānic school, I would have liked to go to the French school.<sup>[3, p. 22]</sup>

**Senegal.** Several *Talibés* in Thiès came to the *Daara* after having dropped out of the public school because the costs were too high or they underachieved.<sup>[15, p. 15]</sup>

**Guinea Bissau.** A group of adolescent boys confirmed that they would all like to leave for the Gambia to study the Qur'ān, except a 12-year old boy who said he would prefer to go to Portugal and become rich.<sup>[17, p. 28]</sup>



## Ways in Which Talibés Become Beggars

Many children are placed with a *Marabout* by their parents or, occasionally, by another relative who takes responsibility for their education outside the home.<sup>[3, 5, 15, 17, 26, 31, 34, 46]</sup> A small number of *Talibés* join a *Marabout* on their own account.<sup>[3]</sup> Although research focusing on *Talibé* beggars has examined parents' motives for sending children to Qur'ānic schools and *Marabouts'* teaching practices, **little is known about how parents choose a *Daara* for their children or how *Marabouts* recruit students for their *Daara*.**

Explanations of why *Talibés* have to beg, highlight the need of the *Marabout* to feed the children in his *Daara*, since poor parents do not pay any fees to the *Marabout*.<sup>[3, 17]</sup> Some religious teachers are accused of being 'false *Marabouts*' who do not teach the Qur'ān and force children to beg by dispensing harsh punishments if they do not bring back a fixed amount of money every day.<sup>[22, 44, p. 41]</sup>

At one end of the spectrum, *Marabouts* are represented as having no other choice than sending *Talibés* out to beg. This is linked with deteriorating rural economies over the past forty years or more. In the past, many Qur'ānic schools were rural, where students lived on the *Marabout's* farm, took a place similar to that of an unmarried son in terms of productive activities, and learned the Qur'ān at dawn and dusk.<sup>[38]</sup> Generally, the local community supported the *Marabouts'* work, and some *Daaras* housed up to 100 *Talibés*.<sup>[8, 16, 55]</sup>

The severe droughts in the 1970s and 1980s, persistent economic crises and the effects of structural adjustment programmes have decreased people's ability and willingness to support large Qur'ānic schools. This has resulted in the shrinking size of schools and an increase in expenses for the *Marabouts*.<sup>[3, 6, 8, 17]</sup> Alongside the migration of rural people to cities and towns<sup>[4]</sup>, the adverse economic climate has also prompted transformations in the economic base of many *Marabouts*. Brotherhoods, like the Muridiyyah of Senegal, which was founded on groundnut cultivation,<sup>[16]</sup> have shifted their base from rural to urban economies,<sup>[7]</sup> leading to the evolution of new forms of Qur'ānic schools.<sup>[28]</sup> **This transformation is often used to explain the increasing numbers of *Talibés* begging in the streets. However, since not all Qur'ānic school students beg, it is important to examine whether urban *Talibés* are involved in other types of remunerative activities.**

At the other end of the spectrum, *Marabouts* are portrayed as exploitative and as recruiting *Talibés* with the purpose of increasing their revenues by forcing children to beg. Evidence of *Talibés* spending time begging instead of receiving an education has been documented for more than a decade in Senegal<sup>[32]</sup> and Nigeria.<sup>[33]</sup> As such malpractice may be possible due to lack of state or religious regulation, **it is important to examine the political economy of education in each country to understand why the state has not issued, or does not enforce, legislation to regulate religious education.**

At this end of the spectrum, children's relocation to urban *Daaras* is often analysed through the lens of trafficking. Contrary to migrant children working in cocoa farming, who are described as having been bought, migrant *Talibés* are seen as victims of trafficking primarily due to the begging. Relocation to neighbouring countries or over long distances adds to the perception of these children being vulnerable.<sup>[22]</sup> The prevalence

Parents' decision to send a child to Qur'ānic school is gendered: in **Mauritania** the father made the decision in 72 per cent of the cases; the mother or another relative in 16 and 12 per cent of the cases respectively.<sup>[5]</sup> In **Senegal** the father made the decision in 86 per cent of the cases; the mother was involved in 8 per cent of the cases. 41 per cent of the boys left their village with the *Marabout*, 27 per cent were brought by their father and 21 per cent by other family members.<sup>[26, p. 35, 48]</sup>

**Senegal.** I'm a *Marabout*. I used to have a *Daara* with around 30 pupils in my village. As the parents didn't have the means to help me take charge of the children, I was obliged to feed the children and buy clothes, medicines, etc. for them, pay my rent of 80,000 CFA francs [US\$ 168] and teach them the Qur'ān. It was hard and then during the farming season many of the parents recalled their children so I had very few to help me on my farm. After the harvest all the students came back but I only had grain for two to three months, so I was obliged to quit the village for Dakar. I now have 50 *Talibés* in Dakar.<sup>[44, p. 11-12]</sup>



of migrant *Talibés* differs greatly from one country to another, but existing studies do not allow to say whether this is linked to general migration patterns or other dynamics.

The importance of social relations between the *Marabout* and his *Talibés* is rarely mentioned despite the fact that around half the children learn the Qur'ān under a *Marabout* with whom they are related, or with whom older siblings or children from the village have studied.<sup>[3, 14, 15, 17, 28, 52]</sup> **Many of the children travelling from their home to the *Daara* with the *Marabout* are thus travelling with a close or distant relative in agreement with their parents or guardians.**

To avoid blanket accusations of trafficking, **parents' response to situations in which children are exploited need to be examined, as do the ways in which this may transform educational strategies in the long run**<sup>1</sup>. Important questions to ask are whether parents send their children to other types of schools, to other *Marabouts*, travel to urban *Daaras* to check on the conditions and, if their practices appear unchanged despite reports of maltreatment of children, why they do not believe such reports.

### Terms of Learning and Living in Daaras

Traditionally, the education offered in *Daaras* is at the elementary level. Students begin to learn the Qur'ān by rote and then gradually learn to read and write Arabic through writing verses on wooden slates.<sup>[1, 3, 16, 17, 48]</sup> The most common pedagogical methods are one-on-one teaching or small-group teaching of students at the same level of learning but of different ages.<sup>[1]</sup> This is a significant difference from public schools, where the teacher-to-pupil ratio often is considerably higher. In Burkina Faso, for example, the average ratio was one teacher to 55.3 pupils in 2007/2008.<sup>[23]</sup> Like in state schools, some *Marabouts* use corporal punishment to discipline their students when they misbehave or recite verses from the Qur'ān incorrectly.<sup>[1, 17]</sup> The length of elementary education varies between four and ten years<sup>[16]</sup>, depending on the child's aptitude, the *Marabout's* pedagogical skills and the time devoted to studying. Only the youngest students (under 15 years of age) beg. Older students are less numerous as they have proceeded to more advanced studies or have left the *Daara* to work.<sup>[5, 15, 34]</sup>

In the literature on forced begging the time dedicated to studying is often used as an indicator of whether a *Marabout* has genuine educational motives or primarily is interested in the money *Talibés* can beg. *Talibés* who study the Qur'ān most of the day and only beg around meal times<sup>[15]</sup> are usually seen as being in accordance with tradition and not as involved in forced begging. The *Talibés* who study primarily at dawn and dusk or in the evening are more difficult to assess. First, *Daaras* do not offer full-time education only. **In some places, traditional Qur'ānic schools have transformed to give children the possibility of studying the Qur'ān outside normal school or work hours, as is the case in Ghana.**<sup>[13]</sup> In Benin, *Marabouts* sometimes support *Talibés'* formal education but it is also common that parents or other relatives pay for the expenses related to

**Senegal.** According to tradition, a *Talibé* spends one hour per day passing from house to house reciting verses from the Qur'ān to receive small gifts that contribute to the subsistence of the *Daara*. In this context, begging is a means to teach the child simplicity and humility. But the way that begging has become the primary activity of *Talibés* today cannot be understood as an element of religious education.<sup>[44, p. 24]</sup>

**Guinea Bissau.** According to a *Marabout*, begging does not belittle a child but makes him humble and resistant and therefore it cannot be considered exploitation or suffering.<sup>[17, p. 36]</sup>

*Talibés'* place of origin: In **Senegal**, 60.5 per cent of the *Talibés* interviewed were from Senegal; 26.3 per cent from Guinea Bissau; 7.4 per cent from the Gambia and 5.7 per cent from other countries.<sup>[22, p. 28]</sup> In **Burkina Faso**, 98 per cent of the *Talibés* were Burkinabé and 2 per cent from Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger and Togo.<sup>[40]</sup>

**Benin.** In 2001, 20 per cent of the *Talibés* were closely related to their *Marabout*; 28 per cent were distantly related; 51 per cent were not related through kinship.<sup>[3, p. 12]</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jacquemin's study of child domestic workers in Côte d'Ivoire shows that parents adapt with whom they place daughters in response to girls being given disappointingly low compensation for their work<sup>[25]</sup> and Thorsen's study of rural child migrants in Burkina Faso that parents worry about exploitation and maltreatment.<sup>[41]</sup>

formal education.<sup>[3]</sup> In Côte d'Ivoire, migrant children sometimes combine work with religious education.<sup>[57]</sup> *Daaras* organised around children's work or begging for the *Marabout* are in line with the way in which rural farm and itinerant Qur'ānic schools functioned in the past,<sup>[28, 38]</sup> but *Talibés* may also spend so much time begging that it is at the expense of their achievements in school.<sup>[16, 22]</sup>

No comparative analysis has been done of study hours in countries, such as Senegal, where *Talibés* often beg,<sup>[17, 22, 47]</sup> Ghana, where *Daaras* provide after-school religious education<sup>[13]</sup> and the Gambia, where a ban on begging is enforced and *Marabouts* are interviewed by the police if any of their students are found begging.<sup>[17, 52]</sup>

**Number of study hours is just one indicator among others and the diversity in educational practices makes it an inadequate proxy indicator of exploitation.**

*Talibés* begging in the street walk long distances to stand at crossroads, mosques, pass restaurants, markets, banks and bus stations where they hope to receive alms in food or cash.<sup>[3, 5, 34, 46]</sup> *Talibés* may also work in the urban informal economy or collect firewood to sell for the *Marabout*. *Talibés* interviewed by Human Rights Watch in 2010 revealed that, while **some *Talibés* only beg a couple of hours per day, others beg up to 10 hours most days.**<sup>[22]</sup>

Some *Marabouts* in Senegal set begging quotas which they expect their students to meet. Such quotas include rice, sugar or money.<sup>[22]</sup>

The sums *Talibés* earn through begging are relatively small and few *marabouts* make large profits, though in some of the very large *Daaras* the sheer number of *Talibés* means that some *Marabouts* earn more than is needed to maintain the *Daara*.<sup>[15]</sup>

**Certain *Marabouts* demand higher quotas on Thursdays and Fridays to benefit from the piety of people attending the mosques, which in turn requires *Talibés* to beg up to 16 hours on those days.**<sup>[22]</sup> This practice is most common in Dakar where the average begging quota is 40 per cent higher on Fridays, whereas in other large cities the quota is unchanged or only slightly higher. It is therefore important to examine local practices surrounding begging in each context. Much attention has been focused on the time *Talibés* spend begging to meet their *Marabout's* quota and to obtain sufficient food for themselves.<sup>[cf. 22, 46]</sup> This tends to overshadow information about *Talibés'* other activities. In Burkina Faso, a study showed that 98 per cent of *Talibés* do not work,<sup>[40]</sup> but it is important to examine the extent to which *Talibés* also work or attend other forms of education. *Talibés* interviewed in both Senegal and Burkina Faso revealed that they may also spend time on leisure activities with or without their *Marabout's* consent.<sup>[40]</sup>

## Risks, Abuse and Punishment

*Talibés* can be subject to abuse at many levels. A number of studies suggest that sending children to Qur'ānic schools amounts to child abuse because of the begging involved, the fact that many *Talibés* are dirty and wear rags when they are on the streets to beg, and *Marabouts'* use of corporal punishment.<sup>[3, 15]</sup> Furthermore, it is suggested that many *Talibés* are trafficked.<sup>[see 17]</sup> Such **broad generalisations are not useful because they ignore the diversity in children's experiences.** While some *Talibés* find the living conditions in the *Daara* so

**Senegal.** Average begging quota in 2010 (in CFA francs)

	Normal Days	Fridays
Dakar	463	642
Saint-Louis	228	228
Thiès	254	268
Mbour [22, p. 32]	246	246

**Burkina Faso.** Most *Talibés* are obliged to beg to supplement their daily ration of food in the *Daara*. They are well aware of their dependence on the generosity of alms givers and say «ça dépend, si tu t'es levé du bon pied ou non».<sup>[40]</sup>

**Burkina Faso.** 54 per cent of *Talibés* spent time on leisure activities, such as table football (34 per cent), video clubs (31 per cent) and football (18 per cent).<sup>[40]</sup>

**Senegal.** *Talibés* in one *Daara* bought a football with their own money and were allowed to play by the *Marabout* as long as they fulfilled their begging quotas and studied well. Other *Marabouts* ban all leisure activities and punish transgressions.<sup>[22, p. 57-58]</sup>

**Benin.** 46.2 per cent of *Talibés* also pursued formal education and of these, 68.5 per cent were supported by their *Marabout* while 24.3 per cent were supported by others, 2.8 per cent had their school fees paid for by an NGO and 2.2 per cent paid their own school fees.<sup>[3, p. 16]</sup>

deplorable that they return home or choose to live in the streets, others find they are treated appropriately even if punished from time to time.<sup>[17, 22, 40]</sup>

Parent's acceptance of different forms of suffering must be understood in its local context. First, parents who perceive begging as work,<sup>[34]</sup> are not necessarily concerned about their children spending more time working than studying, especially not if the children retain some of the money they earn. In contrast, parents who are opposed to child begging<sup>[17]</sup> are unlikely to choose *Daaras* where begging is involved.

Second, the issue of appearance may result from poor living conditions and the *Marabout's* negligence,<sup>[22]</sup> but it may also be the 'dress code' for beggars in general to increase their chances of receiving alms. Elsewhere it has been shown that the right demeanour is important and also that young children are successful in begging due to people feeling pity for them, whereas older children earn much less because people think they are lazy or delinquent (Ethiopia<sup>[2]</sup>; Haiti<sup>[27]</sup>; and Indonesia<sup>[9]</sup>). The differences between *Daaras* with regard to how *Talibés* are treated, the sufficiency of food and treatment in case of illness affects a child's development. Research suggests that *Talibés* may be stunted in their growth due to malnutrition, endemic and untreated diseases.<sup>[3, 16]</sup> While such evidence should influence policy responses, it is also important to examine the impact on children's physical development comparatively to ascertain whether siblings at home or living with other relatives are better off.

Third, the issue of corporal punishment needs to be analysed in greater depth. Adults may consider the sanctions they inflict on children to have a positive effect on children's behaviour and socialisation. Disciplining may involve deprivations of various types – from withholding food to barring the child from watching TV – corporal punishment, such as a slap or a beating and verbal abuse and curses.<sup>[18, 28]</sup> *Talibés* experiences of discipline are diverse and so are parents' views on harsh forms of disciplining. Some fathers have themselves been severely beaten in Qur'anic schools but are not deterred from sending their sons to a *Marabout*,<sup>[44]</sup> and yet not all parents approve of the harsh treatment of *Talibés*.<sup>[17, 28]</sup>

Finally, children begging in the street are vulnerable to the risks of traffic accidents.<sup>[22]</sup> *Talibés* may also be verbally abused while begging.<sup>[15]</sup> Some *Talibés* may become street children if they leave the *Daara* and do not feel they can return home.<sup>[17]</sup> Some children join kin or other social relations in the migrant community aim to become successful migrants.<sup>[43]</sup> To find children integrating into the migrant community is difficult but would be of interest for programming.

**Burkina Faso.** According to Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) 44 per cent of the street children in Ouagadougou in 2004 were former *Talibés*.<sup>[40]</sup>

**Burkina Faso.** In the presence of the *Marabout*, 74 per cent of the *Talibés* said they were not mistreated. Corporal punishment seems to be inherent in studying the Qur'ān and *Marabouts* declare that the knowledge of the Qur'ān is so precious that it cannot be learned with ease.<sup>[40]</sup>

**Mauritania.** Beatings are by far the most common type of punishment in *Daaras*. 213 of 300 *Talibés* had received a beating of some form, followed by 84 and 37 of 300 who had been intimidated or deprived of something respectively. The three most common reasons for such punishment were absence (288 of 300 *Talibés*), faulty recitation of the Hadiths (175 of 300) and lack of attention (68 of 300).<sup>[5, p. 18]</sup>

**Benin.** 94.5 per cent of *Talibés* had received a slap; 48.6 per cent had been slapped on the head; 12.2 per cent had to restudy a wrongly recited verse, 3.9 per cent had been denied food.<sup>[3, p. 17]</sup>

## Implications for Children of Begging as Part of their Qur'ānic Schooling

The mediatised images of skinny *Talibés* in rags begging in the street give a very strong impression of the suffering to which these children are subjected. However, the images are offered without contextualising the importance of mobility in the Sahelian countries, local practices of child rearing, and general educational constraints shaped by economic hardship and government policies. Knowledge is also lacking about local

norms that may protect children from a variety of risks in places of education, play and residence. **The image of begging *talibés* often hints at a critique of Muslim parents and *Marabouts*, which does not take fully into account changes that are already happening**, such as the development of *Madāris* for full-time education and *Daaras* that are suited to children who attend state schools or work. The hazards should not be ignored but the failure to see that so-called traditional practices are changing in diverse ways, hinders identifying how best to protect and support these children and their families.

**Senegal.** 37 per cent of the child beggars (*Talibé* and non-*Talibé*) are in contact with their family. Children aged 2-8 years are more likely to have lost contact with their families.<sup>[44, p. 40]</sup> Most children enter a *Daara* when they are 6-8 years old.

### Child Development, Education and Learning

It is important to look at local practices of child rearing to understand the underlying ideologies among adults for the expectations they have of boys and girls of different ages but also for understanding the expectations children and young people have of their parents. The relocation of children for educational purposes is rooted in the view that children do not belong to the birth parents only but to the extended kin group. Consequently, **a child's socialisation and learning of various skills is the responsibility of a large group of people.**<sup>[11, 36, 54, 56]</sup> This is particularly important when the child is related to the *Marabout* through kinship, as were at least one-fifth of the *Talibés* interviewed in Benin in 2001.<sup>[3]</sup>

Educational relocation is also rooted in the belief that **distance helps children adapt to all kinds of situations and stand on their own feet.**<sup>[46]</sup> Some studies portrait the sending of children to Qur'ānic schools as parental neglect and as a denial of a proper childhood. *Talibés* are reported to miss their parents and parents to be withholding contact to prevent *Talibés* from running away from the *Daara*. Other studies report that parents miss and worry about children who have left.<sup>[3, 15, 17, 21]</sup> Parents and children regularly state that **good education involves repressing emotions and being able to endure. Suffering in different forms is accepted as an integral part of socialisation and of acquiring knowledge.**<sup>[12, 16, 17]</sup>

**Parents'** views on the virtues of Qur'ānic schools vary. Generally, *Daaras* are viewed as important educational institutions, and some parents in Senegal argue that in addition to learning the Qur'ān, rural children learn about the urban economy, other languages and cultures when studying away from home.<sup>[17, 34]</sup> In their view, urban and rural *Daaras* are similar and the only difference is that urban *Talibés'* 'farm' is the street and their 'crop' is money instead of groundnuts.<sup>[34, p. 63]</sup> Underlying this perspective is a conceptualisation of begging as work and a reluctance to criticise a religious authority, such as the *Marabout*.

However, other parents, as well as child rights advocates, stress that *Talibés* spend excessive amounts of time begging for alms and note that the children may not attain the level of religious knowledge they and their parents had hoped for.<sup>[17, 46]</sup> As these *Talibés* are also likely to miss out on technical training and on gaining skills in farming, it is argued that the children's Qur'ān studies may end up undermining their future possibilities.<sup>[17]</sup> Underlying this perspective is a broad critique of *Daaras*. Yet, it is questionable whether *Talibés'* job prospects are undermined in reality. Many *Talibés* leave their studies in their early teens when they join the pool of young people with little education who compete for jobs in the informal economy. They are neither better nor worse off than other children and youth of this age when it comes to finding employment. Although recommendations were made in 2001 by an assembly of authorities from the Muslim community, law enforcing institutions and child protection officers in Benin to incorporate practical skills training in Qur'ānic schools,<sup>[3]</sup> the reviewed literature does not address this issue.

### Educational Trajectories and Upward Social Mobility

The focus on *Talibés* who beg provides an account of living and learning conditions in *Daaras* that does not distinguish between students of different ages. No accounts exist of the progression from entry-level Qur'ānic student to more specialised Islamic learning and becoming assistant teachers. Apart from situations where *Talibés* leave their *Daara* to live on the streets, little is known about *Talibés'* activities once they finish Qur'ānic

school and make the transition to income-earning activities. **To enrich the understanding of parental choices regarding the type of education they send their children to, it is important to identify how studying in a *Daara* may impact positively or negatively children's prospects for the future.**

## Policy and Programme Initiatives

This paper examines recent child protection work implemented to protect children who beg on the streets as part of their education in Qur'ānic boarding schools and assesses the effectiveness of programme initiatives. Given the paucity in statistical data on children's education in religious institutions and the focus on one of several forms of Islamic education, **effectiveness cannot be measured in numbers of students.** A more qualitative assessment is needed of whether policies and programmes are based on a nuanced understanding of the circumstances in which children are sent to *Daaras*, of local notions of childhood and education and of alternatives to education in urban *Daaras*.

**Senegal.** Neighbours' allegations of forcing children to beg resulted in the arrest of a man, who was then found to have trafficked children from Guinea Bissau. A few other *Marabouts* were awaiting trial for similar offenses.<sup>[52]</sup>

**Guinea Bissau.** The main traffickers come from Bafata and Gabu, where they operate openly and are protected by their status in the Muslim community.<sup>[52]</sup>

International policy is premised on the idea that many *Talibés* have been trafficked and that children are forced to beg at the expense of their education. The presence of children in the streets during school hours supports the perception of children not being protected. This perception is based on a globalised notion of childhood according to which children should have a care-free childhood and be in school. Internationally-funded programmes that aim to rescue children from exploitation highlight opposing views on *Talibé* begging. While *Marabouts* and parents are concerned about attempts to curb children's education in Qur'ānic schools and do not see children's mobility as trafficking, child rights advocates, NGOs and civil servants are concerned about practices they consider as a violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).<sup>[17, 30]</sup>

National policy environments are ambiguous. On the one hand, several countries have legislated to address the problem of *Talibé* begging<sup>[15]</sup> and the trafficking of children linked with *Daaras*.<sup>[52]</sup> However, religious education is changing over time and the proliferation of different forms of Qur'ānic schools is a response to changing political economies, whether driven by Islamic clerics, the state or the international community.

### Preventing *Talibés* from Begging: prohibition, awareness raising and education

Programmes to address *Talibé* begging began several decades ago but the international push for child protection legislation increased after the ratification of the CRC in 1989.<sup>[47]</sup> **The only country in West Africa to implement an outright ban on begging is the Gambia,** where security forces routinely enforce the law against *Marabouts* who send *Talibés* begging.<sup>[17, 52]</sup> International organisations advocate for similar measures in other countries,<sup>[15]</sup> but enforcing laws requires support from political and religious leaders, as well as the general public. Most preventive measures target child trafficking. In Senegal the 'Law to Combat Trafficking in Persons and Related Practices and to Protect Victims' of 2005 devotes a section to forced begging and the vulnerability of children. Accordingly, anyone found guilty of organising or pressuring another person to beg can be fined or imprisoned. However, considering the scale of *Daara* education involving begging, few persons have been prosecuted. This suggests that **the government is taking some action but falls short of protecting *Talibés* due to a lack of leadership and the thorny political issue of regulating religious education.**<sup>[15]</sup>

Other interventions seek to prevent begging by subsidising *Daaras* through food aid, clothing or assistance to construct better sleeping facilities. Some *Marabouts* also have received direct income support as incentives or compensation to stop sending their pupils out to beg. However, these interventions are being replaced by activities that target *Talibés* directly because of concerns that assistance to *Marabouts* could create incentives for *Marabouts* to relocate *Daaras* to urban areas.<sup>[34, 44]</sup> **Assistance to *Marabouts* can be seen on a par with**



**Universal Primary Education policies that provide school lunches, school infrastructure in the form of school buildings and furniture and salaries for teachers. This is not only a thorny political issue globally but also nationally.** Countries, such as Senegal, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and Chad promote secular public education systems despite the popularity of Islamic schools. This has hindered state-driven reforms of religious education.<sup>[50]</sup> Interventions by international organisations are likely to be seen as unwelcome interference with sovereign politics.<sup>[30]2</sup>

Anti-trafficking initiatives supported by IPEC's LUTRENA programme focused on capacity-building of government and non-governmental agencies addressing the trafficking of children. Current policy recommendations point to the need for further capacity-building in relation to services dealing with children who beg as part of their Qur'anic studies.<sup>[15, 45, 46, 47]</sup> In Guinea Bissau, for example, police officers have been trained to intercept groups of children who are, or are perceived to be, trafficked within the country or between countries.<sup>[17, 47, 52]</sup> These children are repatriated to their village after a short stay in an NGO-run transit centre while their parents are being located.<sup>[17]</sup>

**Senegal.** A pilot project implemented by ENDA GRAF supported the return of one Marabou to his village by investing in buildings for the Daara, a well and training in new agricultural techniques. This was seen as a means to make village-based Daaras attractive to prevent parents from sending children to urban-based Daaras.<sup>[44]</sup>

Interventions also include awareness-raising campaigns targeting the 'supply-side', namely the parents or guardians who are assumed to be unaware of the extent to which their children beg, the level of corporal punishment or low attainment of religious knowledge among *Talibés*. However, **this approach fails to take into account the diverse reasons underlying parents' decisions to send a child to a Qur'anic school.** Parents may feel antipathy towards civil servants and NGOs implementing anti-trafficking measures if they see these efforts as attempts to reduce educational and social opportunities for their children.<sup>[16, 17, 34]</sup> Awareness-raising campaigns also target the 'demand-side'<sup>3</sup> to make the general public aware of exploitative practices and the fact that alms given to *Talibés* may not benefit the children.<sup>[15, 16, 34]</sup>

Awareness-raising campaigns include press releases and public statements featured in national newspapers and on radio and TV programmes.<sup>[34, 47]</sup> Child rights activists may frame awareness-raising in terms of children's rights to education or to have a childhood. This framing is premised on a globalised notion of childhood according to which children lack protection and suffer when they are away from their family. Local authorities, including some *Marabouts*, are more likely to stress institutional failures pertaining to the under-performance of some Qur'anic schools or the malpractice of *Marabouts* who are more interested in material gains than in teaching the Qur'an to the students.<sup>[17, p. 57]</sup>

Finally, anti-begging measures supported by international organisations have focused on education. **Recent interventions have been targeted directly at *Talibés*, supporting a variety of combinations of secular and Qur'anic education,**<sup>[16, 17, 53]</sup> as well as second chance education in the form of a condensed curriculum, a shorter alphabetisation programme or technical training.<sup>[44, 45]</sup> Furthermore, interventions aim to enhance the access to education in rural areas. This is done by aiding parents economically through social transfers to ensure they can afford to keep children in school<sup>[47]</sup> and by assisting *Marabouts* to return to rural areas.

### Child Protection Services

By the late 1990s, child rights organisations and NGOs had taken over policy responses to *Talibés* begging and implemented programmes that put *Talibés* on a par with street children.<sup>[34]</sup> NGO-driven response services to assist *Talibés* and other children begging on the streets have proliferated and a large number of NGOs are involved in the provision of such child protective services.<sup>[17, 47]</sup> The provision of drop-in centres, shelters and

<sup>2</sup> Please note that academic research is underway on the issue of parental preferences and religious education in Senegal, Mali and Niger. See <http://www.institutions-africa.org/page/religious-education>.

<sup>3</sup> 'Demand-side' refers to the duty of Muslims to give alms and to the widespread popular belief that giving to poor children is a good deed that will be rewarded spiritually or materially.

telephone hotlines is aimed at all children in vulnerable situations. The centres often provide material support in the form of food, clothing, health care, psychological support and legal advice.<sup>[17, 22, 44, 47]</sup> Some centres also have staff who provide outreach services for *Talibés* and street children. Another initiative is to find 'foster mothers' for *Talibés*, i.e. to find a woman who is willing to take on the responsibility of feeding one *Talibé* every day, provide him with clothes and support the child emotionally.<sup>[47]</sup>

Finally, some NGOs support the repatriation of *Talibés* found begging in the streets. Such programmes are often represented as rescue missions aiding children at risk who need assistance to return to their families. Repatriation and reintegration programmes have to be voluntary and need to include specialised psychosocial care and support and appropriate education, vocational training and livelihood options. Many poorly implemented reintegration programmes fail because they do not consider the educational, social and economic aspirations of parents and children.<sup>[16, 17]</sup> **There is a need to develop a broader range of educational and economic options for *Talibés*, including in the urban areas to which they have migrated. Sending them back home and expecting them to go to school cannot be the only option.**

**Guinea Bissau.** An eight-year-old *Talibé* who was repatriated from Senegal described how he had been lured to a reception centre by the promise of money, only to be trapped in the centre and repatriated one week later.<sup>[17, p. 55]</sup> According to one government officer in Guinea Bissau, all they did was to take children from one punishment to another. Repatriated boys were given money to give to their fathers, which would be enough to buy rice for two weeks. Otherwise the children were not supported and rarely pursued education, technical training or found jobs.<sup>[17, p. 40-42]</sup>

### Regularisation of Education in *Daaras*

In some countries the reform of traditional Qur'ānic schools has created a viable alternative to secular state schools.<sup>[16, 29]</sup> Yet, *Marabouts* are divided on the subject of regularising education in *Daaras* by integrating subjects from the public education system. Some see state schools as corrupting and uprooting children from their cultural values and Qur'ānic schools as places that teach humanistic values, while others see the advantage in combining Qur'ānic studies with a broader curriculum.<sup>[1, 5]</sup> **In Benin and Guinea Bissau there is broad support for the standardisation of the curriculum and of methods of teaching in Qur'ānic schools.** Consultations with *Marabouts* reveal that they ask for assistance to provide the basic needs for children which normally are met by parents and guardians, or demand the same subsidies as government schools.<sup>[cf. 3, 5, 16, 17]</sup> With regard to the curriculum, modernised *Daaras* resemble *Madāris*.<sup>[16]</sup>

Reformed Qur'ānic schools, such as the Arabic schools, place emphasis on religious studies and some secular topics but use Arabic as the language of instruction. Modern schools, such as the Arabic-English and the Franco-Arab schools, cover most or all of the government curriculum in addition to studying the Qur'ān.<sup>[1, 13, 17, 19, 29, 34, 50]</sup> Some countries, such as Ghana, have government schools that offer a programme of religious and Arabic language studies, which is a trade-off between having teachers and textbooks paid for by the government and a curriculum that limits the number of hours allocated to studying the Qur'ān.<sup>[13]</sup> In Mali, Chad and Senegal, students in Franco-Arab schools sit exams recognised by the state.<sup>[16, 19, 50]</sup> As these are private schools, fees have to be paid. In Senegal, for example, fees of \$5 to \$15 were paid per seven-month school year.<sup>[34]</sup> The teaching in these types of schools resembles the way in which children are taught in secular schools.

**Parents are generally positive about modern Qur'ānic schools because they see them as more efficient, as teaching children additional subjects to the Qur'ān and as inclusive because girls can also pursue Qur'ānic education.**<sup>[13, 34]</sup> What keeps some parents from sending their children to improved schools are the costs, but there is scope for developing Islamic schools further to offer an alternative to state schools for Muslim children.<sup>[13]</sup>



## Questions that Need Further Investigation

- Why does uneven representation of ethnic groups occur in *Daaras*? How do gender (notions of masculinity), age, poverty and processes of marginalisation impact on uneven patterns of *Daara* attendance?
- Examine the political economies of education to understand why the state has not issued – or does not enforce – legislation to regulate religious education?
- How do parents choose a *Daara*? How do *Marabouts* recruit students?
- How do parents respond to situations in which their children are exploited? How do such responses impact on common educational strategies?
- Is the physical development of a *Talibé* different from that of his siblings back home or living with other relatives?
- What are children's motivations for studying in Qur'ānic schools?
- Do *Talibé* migration patterns reflect general migration flows in West Africa?
- What do former *Talibés* do for a living? What are their career options and paths?
- How do former *Talibés* integrate in migrant communities?

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